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Explaining the Intuition of Revelation

Abstract: *This commentary focuses on explaining the intuition of revelation, an issue that Chalmers (2018) raises in his paper. I first sketch how the truth of revelation provides an explanation for the intuition of revelation, and then assess a physicalist proposal to explain the intuition that appeals to Derk Pereboom's (2011; 2016; 2019) qualitative inaccuracy hypothesis.*

1. Introduction

Recently, philosophers have appealed to *revelation* — the thesis that the essences of phenomenal properties are revealed in experience — to argue against physicalism (e.g. Goff, 2017; Nida-Rümelin, 2007). Revelation is often thought to be intuitive. Chalmers (2018, p. 25) himself notes that the intuition of revelation may be responsible for generating problem intuitions concerning consciousness, but that it ‘remains to provide an explanation of why we have the sense of... revelation’.

This paper addresses what explains the intuition of revelation. After clarifying revelation, I outline an explanation for the intuition of revelation that appeals to the truth of revelation. I then assess a physicalist proposal that draws on Pereboom's (2011; 2016; 2019) qualitative inaccuracy hypothesis.

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2. Revelation

In the literature, revelation has been given various formulations. Sometimes, it is formulated with respect to *phenomenal concepts* (Goff, 2017; Nida-Rümelin, 2007); sometimes, with respect to *introspection* (Chalmers, 2018, p. 25). But neither of these two philosophical notions is necessary in formulating revelation (Lewis, 1995; Stoljar, 2009; Liu, 2019). The basic idea is that by having an experience with phenomenal property Q, we are in a position to know the nature or essence of Q.

We can understand knowledge of the essence of a property in terms of knowledge of some truth which *captures*, i.e. accurately describes, what the property is in its most core respects.² For instance, in knowing the truth ‘being triangular is having a three-sided closed shape’, one knows the essence of the property of triangularity — what triangularity is in its most core respects. The predicate ‘having a three-sided closed shape’ captures the essence of triangularity.

Revelation can thus be understood as the claim that by having an experience-token with phenomenal property Q, one is in a position to know the truth ‘Q is X’, where the predicate ‘X’ captures the essence of Q. Note that we find ourselves devoid of words to describe the phenomenal characters of many experiences. If I attempt to define what *phenomenal redness* is, it might seem that all I can say is that ‘It is *that*’, using a demonstrative as a placeholder for my rich understanding of *phenomenal redness* which I cannot put into words. So, it seems that this essence-capturing truth ‘Q is X’, known through having an experience with Q according to revelation, may be hard to put into words.

Given the aforesaid, revelation can be formulated as consisting of the following two claims:

- (i) By having an experience-token with phenomenal property Q, one is in a position to know *de dicto* that Q is X.
- (ii) ‘X’ captures the essence of Q.

² ‘Capture’ here should *not* be taken just to mean ‘refer to, latch onto’; it is understood as ‘representing accurately in words or pictures’ (see Loar, 1990). Phenomenal concept strategists such as Loar would say that phenomenal concepts ‘capture’, in the sense of *referring to* but not in the sense of *representing accurately*, physical/functional properties. Such physicalists would reject revelation.

Revelation thus formulated is incompatible with standard versions of physicalism (see Liu, 2019). According to standard physicalism, phenomenal properties are physical/functional properties with physical/functional essences, and the essence-capturing truth ‘Q is X’ is some physical/functional truth where the predicate ‘X’ is a physical/functional predicate, e.g. ‘Q is being an event of C-fibres firing’. But, in having an experience with phenomenal property Q, we are certainly not in a position to know such a truth ‘Q is X’ where ‘X’ is a physical/functional predicate. So, given revelation, standard versions of physicalism are false.

3. Explaining the Intuition of Revelation

Revelation is often thought of as intuitive by philosophers including Chalmers (2018, p. 25) and, notably, many physicalists (e.g. Lewis, 1995; McLaughlin, 2003; Hill, 2014). One might think that the intuition of revelation — the fact that we believe/judge or are disposed to believe/judge revelation to be true — provides *prima facie* support for the truth of revelation, which figures as the crucial premise in an argument against physicalism. A physicalist might then want to *explain away* the intuition of revelation, explaining it in a way that does not appeal to the truth of revelation, and subsequently undermining the support it lends to revelation. Given our formulation of revelation, such a physicalist would have to explain why we judge or are disposed to judge the following claims to be correct (although, on the physicalist’s own account, they are not both true):

- (i) By having an experience with phenomenal property Q, one is in a position to know *de dicto* that Q is X.
- (ii) ‘X’ captures the essence of Q.

Before I turn to a particular physicalist strategy for explaining away the intuition of revelation, let me show how the truth of revelation features in one possible explanation for the intuition of revelation.

If revelation is true, then phenomenal property Q *manifests* its essence — captured by the predicate ‘X’ — to the subject when the subject has an experience with Q. We can think of this manifestation as a kind of accurate phenomenal appearance of phenomenal properties — in having an experience with Q, it *phenomenally appears* to the subject that Q is X, where ‘X’ captures *what it is like*

for a subject to have an experience with Q.³ *Phenomenal appearances*, which are *experiences*, are distinguished from *epistemic appearances*, which are *beliefs*, though the two are often intimately linked (Chisholm, 1957). Our beliefs are often reasonable responses to our experiences. We can say that upon having an experience in which it phenomenally appears that Q is X, the subject is rationally disposed to judge that Q is X and, in normal circumstances, this judgment constitutes knowledge.

So, our having experiences of which revelation is true, together with our possessing the relevant concepts, i.e. concepts of *experience*, *phenomenal properties*, and *knowledge*, explains our actually making or being disposed to make, not only judgments of the form ‘Q is X’, but also (and crucially for present purposes) judgments of the form (i). The fact that experience does not present Q as anything else but X, together with our possessing the concept of *essence*, explains why we would judge or be disposed to judge (ii).

4. Introspective Inaccuracy

A physicalist explanation for the intuition of revelation cannot appeal to the truth of revelation but it might appeal to Pereboom’s (2011; 2016; 2019) qualitative inaccuracy hypothesis (QIH), which Chalmers (2018, p. 25) also mentions. Pereboom (2011, p. 14) thinks that introspective representation might be inaccurate in the sense that introspection systematically ‘represents phenomenal properties as having qualitative natures they do not in fact have’ (see also 2016; 2019). By ‘qualitative natures of phenomenal properties’, Pereboom (2016, p. 173) means ‘the what-it’s-like features of sensory states’ which, he says, are ‘illusory in that they don’t exist’. As I read Pereboom, he allows an experience to have a so-called ‘phenomenal’ property Q, but does not allow that Q is a what-it-is-like property, nor that Q has what-it-is-like features (which might be captured by ‘X’). A physicalist who wants to explain away the intuition of revelation might appeal to Pereboom’s QIH and say, first, that this systematic introspective misrepresentation of Q as having the what-it-is-like features X explains why we judge or are disposed to judge (i); and, second, that

³ This *accurate* phenomenal appearance is *not* a separate experience distinct from the experience with Q.

since introspection does not represent Q as anything else but X, we also judge or are disposed to judge (ii).

As it stands, QIH is unclear because there are two ways to understand the notion of ‘introspective representation’ (see Stoljar, 2013; Kammerer, 2018). One is to say that an introspective representation is a *belief*, understood as ‘epistemic appearance’. To say that introspection represents Q as X is to say that the subject introspectively *believes/judges* that Q is X. Call this version of QIH ‘QIH-ep’. Alternatively, an introspective representation is an *experience*, understood as ‘phenomenal appearance’. To say that introspection represents Q as X is to say that it *phenomenally appears* that Q is X. Call this version of QIH ‘QIH-ph’. I shall argue that neither version of QIH both seems plausible and explains the intuition of revelation.

4.1. QIH-ep

An experience *e* has a phenomenal property Q which, in reality, has a physical nature and no what-it-is-like features captured by ‘X’. The subject of experience falsely believes *that Q is X*. But *experiencing* Q as X and *believing* Q to be X are, intuitively, phenomenologically distinct. QIH-ep counter-intuitively entails that we are not in a position to make such a distinction from the inside (Stoljar, 2013, p. 748). On QIH-ep, although we think that there is an experience in which Q is presented as X, there is *only* the false belief that Q is X. So, there is at least a question mark against the plausibility of QIH-ep.

QIH-ep also does not seem to explain why we (are disposed to) judge (i):

- (i) By having an experience with phenomenal property Q, one is in a position to know *de dicto* that Q is X (where ‘X’ captures what-it-is-like features).

The intuition of (i) cannot be explained by appeal to — borrowing terminology from Hill (1991, p. 128) — subjects’ *errors of ignorance* about their own experiences (i.e. ‘when beliefs are based on [phenomenal] appearances that fail to do justice to the entities to which the beliefs refer’), because on QIH-ep there is simply no experience in which Q *phenomenally appears* to be X — there is just the *experience e* with Q, which does not have what-it-is-like features, and the *belief* that Q is X.

Nor can the intuition of (i) be explained by appeal to — borrowing another term from Hill (*ibid.*) — *errors of judgment* arising from

inattention or expectation. No amount of *attention* would bring the subject closer to the true (physical) nature of Q if that nature is *hidden*. A subject cannot possibly *expect* Q to be X without possessing the phenomenal concept expressed by the predicate 'X', and possession of such a concept usually depends on having had an experience whose phenomenal property has those what-it-is-like features.⁴

4.2. QIH-ph

Pereboom (2011; 2016; 2019) himself prefers to understand introspective representations as *experiences*, and to explain the false belief that Q is X on the basis of false (phenomenal) appearances:

The open possibility I am envisioning [QIH] would have us making errors of ignorance in our introspection-based beliefs about phenomenal properties, since such beliefs would be based on appearances that fail to do justice to the real qualitative nature of those properties. (Pereboom, 2011, p. 22, fn. 33)

Suppose I have an experience e_1 with phenomenal property Q which has a physical nature. On QIH-ph, it is an *illusion* that Q has what-it-is-like features X. This illusion involves a separate but simultaneous second-order experience, e_2 , (mis)representing Q as having what-it-is-like features X, and mediating between e_1 and the introspective belief that Q is X.

Now, since e_2 is an experience, it has a phenomenal property Q', but Q', like e_1 's property Q, lacks what-it-is-like features. Given that there is nothing it is like for the subject to have experience e_2 , one might wonder whether e_2 's misrepresentation of Q is sufficient to create *the illusion that Q has what-it-is-like features X*. Furthermore, Q', like Q, also *seems* to have what-it-is-like features, and this, too, must be an *illusion* on QIH-ph and needs to be accounted for. In response, Pereboom (2016, pp. 177–8; see also 2011, pp. 27–8) suggests, or at least allows, a further layer of introspective misrepresentation, an experience e_3 which represents Q' as having what-it-is-like features (X', say). That is, experience e_3 represents there being something it is like for the subject, for e_2 to represent e_1 's property Q as having what-it-is-like features.

⁴ This point does not rely on a general principle that, *for every concept C*, possession of C requires acquaintance with cases that fall under C. It is not arbitrary to suppose that recognitional concepts of what-it-is-like features may be somewhat distinctive in this respect.

If the illusion that Q is X (on which the false belief that Q is X is to be based) actually *requires* e_3 , in addition to e_2 , then it may seem that the requirement will iterate, leading to a regress of introspective misrepresentations. But Pereboom denies that QIH-ph generates such a regress: '[a]t some level, I form only a belief, without distinctive phenomenology, that I am representing a mental state' (2016, p. 178). Suppose that, with e_1 , e_2 , and e_3 in place, the subject judges that Q is X. How can that judgment, and the resulting belief, be based on *the illusion that Q is X* if there is nothing it is like for the subject to have the three experiences that are supposed to create the illusion?

Perhaps it will be suggested that the judgment that Q is X is enabled by a *false belief* that there is something it is like to have experience e_3 , or that e_3 's property Q'' has what-it-is-like features X'' . But it would remain to explain how the belief that Q'' is X'' figures in the aetiology of the belief that Q is X. And we should need an account — avoiding the problems that face QIH-ep — of how the false belief that Q'' is X'' arises without a corresponding experiential misrepresentation.⁵

In short, it is unclear that QIH-ph can explain intuition (i). Also, there is a question mark against the plausibility of QIH-ph because the model of introspection it assumes is controversial (e.g. Stoljar, 2013, p. 748). Furthermore, Pereboom himself seems rather cautious about his illusionist proposal and acknowledges that it 'resists imaginative conception' (2019, p. 192). A friend of revelation would surely insist that the truth of revelation offers a much better explanation for the intuition of revelation.

5. Conclusion

Recall the two components of revelation:

- (i) By having an experience with phenomenal property Q, one is in a position to know *de dicto* that Q is X.
- (ii) 'X' captures the essence of Q.

Understood a certain way, (i) seems compelling regardless of whether revelation is true: by having an experience with quale Q, one is in a

⁵ It was suggested to me that the belief that Q'' is X'' could be explained by appealing to *expectations*: since we have already believed Q to be X, and Q' to be X' , we might also *expect* Q'' to be X'' . But if the ground-level illusion and belief that Q is X are causally posterior to the third-level belief that Q'' is X'' , then perhaps an expectation account of how the third-level belief arises is not so plausible.

position to know that Q is X, where ‘X’ captures the *what-it-is-like features* of Q (though this might be hard to put into words). The truth of revelation, as we saw, offers a straightforward explanation for the intuition of (i). Given (i) thus understood, my position is that there is more reason to motivate the claim that the essence of Q is revealed in experience, hence (ii), than to argue that it is hidden. But some physicalists would of course disagree and deny (ii) in spite of agreeing to (i) where ‘X’ captures the what-it-is-like features of Q.

Illusionists, Pereboom included, take a more radical approach. They maintain that (i) (where ‘X’ captures the what-it-is-like features of Q) is in fact erroneous. But the denial of (i) thus understood is highly counter-intuitive. Illusionists need to explain the intuition of (i) in a way that does not make their proposal unclear or implausible.⁶ They need to explain why the belief/judgment *that Q is X* arises and then extend this core explanation to account for the intuition of revelation and, specifically, for our disposition to believe (i). If such a physicalist explanation is wanting, then plausibly the truth of revelation provides the best explanation and, given inference to the best explanation, revelation is indeed true.

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⁶ For instance, Kammerer’s (2019) proposal which appeals to putative principles of our naïve theory of mind may be taken as a putative explanation for the intuition of revelation, and should thus be assessed on another occasion.

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